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NEWSBEAT

THE ROOTS OF A CULT

THE LIVES of blacks in America's urban ghettos are a tale of poverty, racism, crime and squalor. Frequently, therefore, they seek refuge in religion and messianic cults.

Such a cult was the Jonestown People's Temple in Guayana where, two months ago, over 800 members died in a mass suicide.

The shocking event has raised questions about cults in general — in the U.S. there are said to be 3,000 religious and non-religious cults. In Israel it has raised questions about the 1,400 Black Hebrews who have come to the country during the last 10 years. The largest concentration is in Dimona, but members of the

sect also live in Arad, Mitzpe Ramon and Eilat.

Israeli governments throughout these 10 years have failed to develop a clear policy regarding the group. At first the authorities treated them with benign neglect. But as their numbers grew, and as their presence caused concern in the Negev towns where they concentrated, the authorities were deterred from any extreme action — such as deportation — by fear of antagonizing Blacks in America.

Three months ago the Minister of the Interior appointed a commission to examine the situation of the Black Hebrews. This commission, headed

by NRP Knesset Member David Glass, must come up with a solution. For the local authorities in Dimona and Arad are no longer prepared to accept the status quo.

The Black Hebrews are equally dissatisfied. They want to be relocated in a settlement of their own. So far the Ministry has not been prepared to recommend such resettlement of the group, most of whom are in Israel illegally and are American citizens.

A team of Jerusalem Post reporters — Joan Borsten, David Richardson, Zvi Ben Nahum — has in recent weeks investigated the Black Hebrews and their problems.

The team was hampered by the reluctance of the authorities, including the police and the Interior Ministry, to cooperate with this fact-gathering effort. But it was spurred by the allegations of neighbours and former cult members, who expressed fears about the cult's values, behaviour and control over its members, and by local officials in Dimona and Arad who want the Black Hebrews removed from their towns.

In a series of five articles, including an interview by Harry Wall, with the cult's leader, Ben-Ami Carter, The Jerusalem Post will try to present the facts and the issues.



(Rubinger)

"Were we prophets? How were we to know that so many would want to come here?" — Yehudit Huebner, Deputy Director General of the Interior Ministry, January 1979

THE BLACK HEBREWS are a relatively small and obscure group by American standards.

Secretive and insular, they are ruled by a charismatic leader who has given them a new, purposeful identity by promising them utopia.

The group emerged in Chicago in the early 1960s, when several ghetto evangelists began preaching Black nationalism grafted onto a form of Judaism as a way out of the Black American predicament. They maintained that Black was not only beautiful but also the colour of the revered Old Testament patriarchs who formed a covenant with God.

Ben-Ami Carter and Shaleak Ben-Yehuda, founders of the Black Hebrews, went a step further and advocated Black Zionism. The forefathers of their followers had not kept "the law," they said, and had consequently been punished with exile and slavery. Now, in anticipation of the coming of the Messiah, they

Operating out of the Abeta Hebrew Cultural Centre on 47th and Cottage Grove, the two men successfully proselytized several hundred Black Christians, Black Muslims, and Blacks who considered themselves Jews but for the most part had not converted. By July 1967 they had persuaded 184 believers to "sell all their worldly

possessions, pick up their crosses, and accept the guidance of their prophets by moving to Liberia." "Just as our people when they came out of ancient Egypt could not enter directly into Israel," Carter explained several years ago, "also at the end of this captivity we could not enter directly into Israel. There were certain mores of the decadent society of America — modern Egypt — which had to be cast off in the wilderness."

There were defections. But most of the group, which settled on a 1,200-acre tract 80 miles from Monrovia, weathered two years of Liberia's shaky economy, primitive conditions, and attempts by government officials to deport them.

Carter and Shaleak used the African sojourn to help the group "shake off the shackles of Negrolism." They strengthened their followers morally and spiritually and transformed them from stereotype ghetto Blacks into a proud, cohesive, obedient "nation." They were distinct from other "nations" by virtue of their vegetarianism, strict moral code, colorful dress and Hebrew names, not to mention their still-evolving religious philosophy.

Among the group's early members, Charles Blackwell, to Israel, "to spy out the land like a modern day Joshua." Blackwell, a former Chicago founder, who today is the head of the Black Hebrew community in Arad, went to Kibbutz Ma'abarot as a volunteer and

remained there for 18 months. He observed kibbutz communal life, probed the nuances of the Law of Return as it applied to Falasha Jews, learned to speak Hebrew fluently, and reported back — in the words of Carter — "on the ways and customs of the people currently living in the Land."

Then four other Black Hebrews — Willy and Tekla Butler, Gloria Verner and her son David — entered Israel in August 1969 as tourists. After a reunion with Blackwell at Ma'abarot, the five were brought to Arad, then a new development town being populated selectively, by David Maimon, head of the Arad Employment Office, and Uzi Helimovich, secretary of the local council.

The Blacks were given work and housing; every effort was made to absorb them into the community — even when it became evident that they were not, as had originally been claimed at the Development Areas Referral Centre, "Falasha Jews who had spent time in the U.S."

In November 1969, while their Jewishness was still being debated by the Religious Affairs Ministry, a second group, mostly women and children, appeared before officials at Lod Airport. Calling themselves the Black Hebrews, they claimed to be the descendants of the 10,000 Jews who had been exiled from Israel 2,000 years ago, they asked to be admitted to the country as immigrants under the Law of Return. They purposefully gave ambiguous answers to questions about their Jewishness.

Morris Lounds, Jr., a Black

American who wrote his doctoral thesis on the cult, believes that in asking for admission under the Law of Return, which not specifically states that they were not Jews, the Black Hebrews bought they were being very clever. It was not their responsibility, he counts, if the Israeli authorities did not catch onto their ruse.

THE INTERIOR MINISTRY'S deputy director-general, Yehudit Huebner, who is in charge of the population registration department, recalls that the government was unsure of what to do with this second group:

"Most were women and children who had no financial resources," she says. "They told us they had 'come home' to be free and not slaves in America, and that they had been thrown out of Liberia. We decided to investigate the matter and gave them temporary housing and three-month visas in the meantime."

In Dimona, the Negev development town with experience in absorbing Jews from various backgrounds, the Black Hebrews were welcomed with open arms. They were given 12 beds in the Nitzahon neighbourhood, as well as loans for their own housing.

Four months later — in March 1970 — a third group, claiming to be the fathers and husbands of the Black Hebrews living in Dimona, arrived in Israel. Among them were Carter and Shaleak. Interior Ministry of-

ficials had by then completed their investigation and decided — as the national press had before them — that the Black Hebrews were not Jews. However, since the Interior Ministry was reluctant to break up families, it allowed the newcomers to be admitted as tourists, stipulating that they were not entitled to housing privileges. The 70 men were taken in by the families already living in Dimona, and they caused considerable overcrowding.

Early in 1971 yet another group arrived. This time it was the Housing Ministry that assumed responsibility for the newcomers. The Mitzpa Ramon municipality was told that 11 "Black Jewish families" wanted to settle in the Negev.

"We took them gladly, with no thought to their colour," says Zvi Niznan, who was deputy mayor at the time. "It meant another lot of homes would be lit up each night in our town."

The group's ranks swelled as new recruits arriving from the U.S. on tourist visas were quickly absorbed. In October 1971 an estimated 250-300 Black Hebrews were living in Israel, most of them illegally. It was then that the Interior Ministry decided to take a hard line. Airport officials were ordered to turn back any Black

ticket or sufficient funds, and the Beersheba office of the Interior Ministry was instructed not to extend the tourist visas of those who wished to "continue visiting" friends and relatives in Dimona.

AS A RESULT new members arriv-

ed with round-trip tickets and sufficient funds, and virtually none of them attempted to renew their visas. The Interior Ministry then decided — in 1972 — that no more Black Hebrews were to be allowed into the country, but gave no guidelines on how to distinguish between cult members and legitimate Black tourists. New recruits circumvented airport screening by passing themselves off as tourists and pilgrims intent on "baptizing their children in the Jordan."

This led to lengthy interrogations and considerable harassment for all Blacks entering Israel — among them Bayard Rustin, one of Israel's strongest supporters in the American Black community, and actor Lou Gossett (of "Roots" fame, who claims he was pulled from passport control lines six times and that a gun was held to his head). Even the world head of the Bahai faith was subjected to similar indignities.

At the same time, the Interior Ministry began to issue deportation orders and promised to expel "in stages" all cult members whose tourist visas expired.

Then, in December 1972, the Supreme Court ruled that the Black Hebrews could not be considered Jews and upheld Interior Minister Yosef Burg's right to deport them. But also suggested that those Black Hebrews already living in Israel be permitted to remain. With that the

Interior Ministry took a ostrich-like stand, burying its head in the sands of bureaucratic inertia.

Only those Black Hebrews convicted of petty crimes or involved in the Axe Murder (the 1974-75 cult squabble which resulted in one Black dying from hatchet wounds) were deported. The others were left in legal limbo — without identity cards, rights or responsibilities.

When 66 Black Hebrews renounced their American citizenship in November 1973, the Interior Ministry ignored the situation, though the U.S. Embassy claimed Israel was now legally responsible for them.

Complaints from residents of Arad and especially Dimona about the overcrowded apartments (reported by over 20 people per unit), overflowing sewage, excessive noise, and unshared public facilities went unanswered or were investigated by

reached no meaningful conclusion. Meanwhile, the Black Hebrews continued to grow and make their own way in the world. There are now about 1,400 Black Hebrews in Israel, most of them living in Dimona and Arad.

Part two in on Sunday.